

THE HAND THAT ROCKS THE CRADLE:
MATERNAL GENDER SUBVERSION IN AMERICAN SUFFRAGE DRAMA

BY

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Abstract

This thesis aims to shed light on the maternal role and its use in subverting feminine gender association. The maternal has always been an important facet in the construction of gender, specifically that of the feminine. By viewing three pieces of American suffrage drama: Ariana Curtis's *The Spirit of '76, or The Coming Woman, a Prophetic Drama* (1868), Alice Ives's *A Very New Woman* (1896) and Alice Thompson's *A Suffragette Baby* (1912), through Judith Butler's performative gender lens, we learn new things about the maternal. Most importantly, we ascertain that the maternal is an entity separate from the feminine gender, that it can be moved and that it can be reapplied to designate non-feminine bodies as maternal. This knowledge has the potential to destabilize gender construction by helping to fragment the feminine, thereby diminishing the power associated with gender as a comprehensive unit.

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**Introduction:
Women's Suffrage and Motherhood**

For the safety of the Nation
To the Women Give the Vote

For the hand that Rocks the Cradle
Will Never Rock the Boat!¹

The banner bearing this message was a very fitting symbol for the mainstream suffrage movement at the time of the final drive to pass the nineteenth constitutional amendment. Historically, the “hand that rocks the cradle” has been simultaneously reified and condemned in order to further societal practices. In particular, the woman’s suffrage movement in the United States capitalized on the topic of the maternal. By “maternal” I am referring to a socially and culturally determined stereotype--that of a selfless nurturer and devoted homemaker--persistently assigned to white, feminine gendered bodies. Those against women’s suffrage often used this social stereotype to relegate women to what was perceived as their “proper place,” namely the home. Some suffrage supporters chose to divert focus away from the maternal model and sphere in order to make visible other occupations that women might pursue, such as voting and running for public office. Ironically, by manipulating common notions about the maternal, the pro- and anti-suffrage movements did indeed rock the boat. A direct focus on the maternal role was eventually found to be one of the most helpful in promoting the emancipation of women.

The purpose of this study is to look at the maternal role, its place within the construction of domesticity and find the relationship between the maternal and suffrage arguments. I will

¹ This banner was carried by the National American Woman Suffrage Association in a parade in Chicago preceding the Republican National Convention in 1916.

analyze this relationship in three different suffrage dramas, *The Spirit of '76*, or *The Coming Woman*, a *Prophetic Drama* (1868), *A Very New Woman* (1896), and *A Suffragette Baby* (1912), and show how the maternal can be read as separate from the feminine. Comparing use of the maternal in these three stylistically different pieces of dramatic literature will help document how the maternal and the efforts towards women's enfranchisement changed throughout both the pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage movement. I will ask questions about why certain choices were made regarding what the mother characters in these plays say, do and are: Why did Ariana Curtis, author of *The Spirit of '76*, choose to name her mother character simply, "Judge?" Why do we see compliance towards male authority in *A Very New Woman*, a pro-suffrage piece? We see that the plot of *A Suffragette Baby* revolves around the *desire* for motherhood. Why does this desire appear to raise a woman's status more than motherhood itself? What does the use of humor in all three of these suffrage dramas teach us about the maternal? Answering these and many other similar questions will help to compile evidence surrounding the maternal stereotype's power and influence during the suffrage movement. This will contribute to our knowledge of the construction of whiteness within the maternal, domesticity's evolution within this paradigm and how the white maternal transition from the private to public sphere (a journey less difficult than the marginalized minorities within the private realm) was represented in dramatic literature.

The Spirit of '76, in its departure from gender norms, replaces the working man with the working woman by positioning women in public offices. *A Very New Woman* not only advocates for a woman's right to vote, but also to study and work in a public field, with Edith's character studying to become a lawyer. *A Suffragette Baby* revolves around a population of working women who live in a communal home and support themselves financially. These plays do not

reflect the specific struggles of women of color or of the poverty-stricken population, but are able to teach us about the feminist perspective of the white working mother on both sides of the suffrage argument.

The American Scene (1907) and other contemporary historical publications such as *Littel's Living Age* (1868) and *The Women's Protest* (1913), represent a portion of the research I am relying on to delineate the suffrage period context. In addition, Henry Austin Clapp's *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic* helps me further delimit the context to one of dramatic literature and production. With regard to the specific question of the maternal, I bring into play specific iconography used in the suffrage movement, social handbooks of the period, including one written by Alice Ives., as well as Amber Kinser's *Motherhood and Feminism* and Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. These last two works provide knowledge about the history of the representation of motherhood, and also enable me to speak to current motherhood and maternity scholarship. While many of my sources use the terms "mother" and "motherhood," and "maternal role" interchangeably, I choose to use the term maternal specifically not to let these notions collapse. The maternal, in this thesis, refers to a facet of feminine gender construction which encompasses birth, child rearing and domestic duties, but I posit can be moved onto non-feminine bodies.

Unlike many of the contemporary feminist scholars who approach women's suffrage from a poststructuralist position, I undertake the topic using a phenomenological lens. Borrowed from Judith Butler, a noted poststructuralist and identity theorist, I am using her performative gender theory to investigate the maternal characters, situations and persuasive tactics used in

these pieces.² By focusing on three suffrage plays written by women, I offer a new perspective on the suffrage drama genre, as the focus previously has included mostly plays by men. In addition, I unlock some mysteries behind the maternal feminist theory of the period, which I use to help readers understand the context of this movement. I am expanding the scope of performative gender theory as it applies to suffrage drama by blurring the connection between femininity and the maternal. Judith Butler and Rosalyn Diprose, in their works on gender embodiment and identity, incorporate the maternal into the discourses that categorize—and in some cases subjugate—women. Moving away from the maternal-feminine connection, I aim to build upon this work by showing how the maternal has its own regulative discourses that can be and are exercised on both masculine and feminine bodies. We are able to see the maternal as an entity separate from gender by analyzing how suffrage dramatists fused the two.

I delimit my investigation to works dealing primarily with working and middle class, white women's suffrage. Though there was much cross-over, the different classes, races and gender configurations of the period faced specific and unique struggles. In an effort to avoid diminishing other difficulties faced by different positions, I limit my analysis to a specific population. In some ways, I share my point of departure with Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James who in their piece, "Women and the Subversion of the Community," assert that their initial concentration on the working-class woman "is not to imply that only working-class women are exploited. Rather it is to confirm that the role of the working-class housewife, which we believe has been indispensable to capitalist production, is the determinant for the position of all other

² The poststructuralist position in regards to women's suffrage focuses mainly on the oppositional nature of the movement in order to protect against contributing to the development of a superficial feminist historiography. Scholars who approach women's suffrage from this position include Elizabeth Meese and Alice Parker, who together contributed to and edited *The Difference Within: Feminism and Critical Theory*. R. Radhakrishnan also contributes to the discourse with works that handle gender and ethnic identity seen as the post-structuralist "difference."

women. Every analysis of women as a caste, then, must proceed from the analysis of the position of working-class housewives.”³ With this in mind I do, however, wish to mention Eva Cherniavsky’s *That Pale Mother Rising: Sentimental Discourses and the Imitation of Motherhood in 19th-Century America*, a study which disrupts the Euro-American feminist discourse surrounding motherhood by highlighting its significant deficiency when dealing with women of color. Women’s suffrage was closely associated with the abolitionist movement. Ann Gordon and Rosalyn Terborg-Pen are two authorities who do an excellent job elucidating the African American woman’s struggle in their scholarship. The very construction of the maternal within suffrage arguments was one that disregarded the colored labor that formed the domestic itself. My choice to focus on the narrative of the nineteenth century white maternal construction within suffrage drama acknowledges that the maternal is normatively understood to apply to white women. I would be remiss if I took the easy road by speaking of the maternal which is *allowed* to be spoken, and not acknowledging Cherniavsky’s and others’ work. The three plays I have chosen represent the white, working-class sect of women especially well and that is why, for the purpose of this thesis, I delimit my topic in this way.

In an effort to further clarify my thesis, I wish to reiterate the reasons surrounding my use of the term “maternal.” When speaking of the women represented in the following suffrage dramas, I often refer to them as “maternal” in order to emphasize the perpetual state that is embedded in notions of the feminine gender, and that includes pregnancy, birth, child-rearing and duties normally associated with this role. The “maternal” goes beyond function, relying on specific commentary within its representations about the seemingly unavoidable association

³ Dalla Costa and James, “Women and the Subversion of the Community” in *Materialist Feminism*, 40.

between motherhood and femininity. Limiting my terminology in this way is meant for clarity as much as to aid the reception of my hypothesis that this term can be used outside of feminine gender construction.

Another clarification must be made about genre. The plays to be analyzed in my study are categorized as comedies, and yet, this term is broad and does not encompass enough specific detail to be helpful in determining motives and strategy in dramatic persuasion. The three genres most frequently used in suffrage drama are comedy, farce and satire. This demarcation may seem commonplace, however these terms are often used interchangeably, and in this thesis I wish to use them in specific ways. The term “comedy,” though often used to refer to all humorous entertainment, in this thesis will refer to light and amusing drama with happy—perhaps unrealistically so—endings. The “farce,” used in the context of this investigation, refers to a dramatic piece that utilizes slapstick and blatantly foolish material purely to elicit laughter from an audience. This does not automatically assume a happy ending for all main characters. And “satire” uses humor not only for entertainment, but also to criticize. A satire is more complex than a farce and comedy due to its use of sarcasm, irony and parody to form a commentary. There are elements of all three of these in the suffrage dramas I have chosen, but certain pieces demonstrate an affinity for one type. *The Spirit of '76*, though labeled in its full title as a drama, is an anti-suffrage satire. *A Very New Woman* is a pro-suffrage comedy. And *A Suffragette Baby* is pro-suffrage and, though identified a comedy and with significant ties to that style, uses decidedly farcical tools to accomplish its humor. It is important to acknowledge and differentiate between these comic styles because humor was used by all three playwrights not only as a persuasive tool, but one that could decouple the maternal from the feminine gender.

The Figure of The Mother in the Suffrage Movement

Through several incidental stories and peripheral implications motherhood became a point of interest that would prove to be a most advantageous tool during the suffrage movement. An article in the *New York Times* from 1913 tells the story of a two year-old boy who was lost at a fair. He was taken care of by suffragettes at their stand until the parents came to claim him, at which time they found out that their son had learned a new phrase, “Votes for Women.” In response, “Papa Hans said the usual things about women occupying themselves with the church, the kitchen and the children, and Mamma Hans said she had been so busy anyway with the kitchen and the children that she hadn’t had much time to think about voting.”⁴ This inconsequential anecdote in a side column of the *New York Times* is one of many that brought to the forefront the issue of mothers and homemakers voting. It would also provide a platform for both pro-suffrage and anti-suffrage arguments by giving the reasoning behind a heavily gender-coded society’s hesitancy to position itself within the movement.

Suffragettes who were also mothers put their children in what would become known as the largest recorded suffrage parade (October 22, 1915) to publicly discredit the antis’ arguments about the movement taking them away from their children.⁵ Some people felt that a woman’s place was the home and her job was raising children and attending to domestic duties. Others felt that a woman could be both suffragette and mother. There were also people, a significant number of them women, on the opposite extreme who advocated that women should stop having children altogether. Mrs. Jessica G. Finch, while president of the Equal Franchise Society in

⁴ “It’s a Suffrage Baby Now.” *The New York Times*, September 19, 1913.

⁵ “Division for Babies in Suffrage Parade,” *The New York Times*, October 22, 1915.

1911, argued that the need for women to replenish the earth with children had passed and that “children can’t fill a mother’s life.”⁶ Finch and many other prominent suffragists felt that women were most needed in the political arena. Though this sentiment brought many into the public realm, others chose to retreat. Mrs. Mendill McCormick of Chicago, chairwoman of the Congressional Committee of the National American Woman Suffrage Association, withdrew from active suffrage work specifically because “her political work [kept] her away from home too much and particularly away from her eighteen-months-old baby, Katrina.”⁷

Assigning women roles as nurturers, moral authorities and guardians of cultural tradition was common in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was a natural inclination for those against women voting to emphasize the importance of women maintaining these roles in the home. It was therefore a clever choice by the pro-suffragists to appropriate this idea and use it in their own persuasive argument. Their reasoning followed that women were to extend their functions beyond the private realm. Much of the pro-suffrage propaganda began touting the necessity of such an expansion. As one historical summary explains:

Society was to be uplifted by woman's higher moral nature (superior to that of man, so the concept held) as that morality was infused into the social and political system. Political and social reform became a moral and civic necessity that would enable women to carry out effectively the work of "woman's proper sphere." Rather than intruding into the male sphere, the rhetoric stressed that woman's sphere was expanding outward to include the community and the nation as the larger "home." Women needed the ballot, so the mainstream argument went, not because they sought to intrude into the male sphere of activity, but in fulfillment of woman's traditional role.⁸

⁶ “Why Women Want Suffrage,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 1911.

⁷ “Baby Wins Over Suffrage,” *The New York Times*, September 25, 1914.

⁸ “Mainstream Use of Domestic Images and Motherhood,” http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/votesforwomen/tour_02-02k.html

This idea of suffrage as maternal writ large was called “social housekeeping” and was a strong persuasive tool for the pro movement. Mothers were also seen as conveyors of tradition and culture by way of raising families that would carry on specific mores. Utilizing this concept, pro-suffrage advocates painted women as purveyors of enlightenment. This concept was personified in their propaganda by the figure of an angel along with the pronounced use of the color gold or other luminescent hue.⁹

The history of suffrage in the United States is full of strife, each underrepresented group pushing for their emancipation cause. The cause of woman’s suffrage was unique in that there was never a gesture by the core women of the movement to compromise. Disenfranchised men, both white and black, advocated for their rights on a sliding scale, dependent on property and freedom, but white women wanted the vote entirely because they were worth the same as those who had it. The intimacy between abolition and women’s suffrage became more apparent as women were encouraged to become active in anti-slavery associations. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and other women who had attended the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London in 1840 returned to the United States and formed the first women’s rights convention. This event, also called the Seneca Falls Convention, took place in New York in 1848 with the purpose of discussing the role of women in society and how they might obtain more rights. Among the main presentations was the reading and signing of a document entitled the “Declaration of Sentiments,” which delineated specific problems to white women and a list of resolutions.¹⁰ One

⁹ Both the NAWSA and the NWP used the figure of the Herald or Angel in their suffrage propaganda, imitating the figure created for the British women’s suffrage movement by Sylvia Pankhurst. Again, these depictions were always of a white female, helping to construct the discourse of white purity within populations of women at this time as well as acknowledging white women as “real” mothers.

¹⁰ Frederick Douglass also signed this document and was an active supporter of women’s suffrage.

of the biggest problems these women wished to overcome was the lack of any rights once a woman became married. “The old theory of the law,” according to Kirk Porter, an historian of the suffrage movement, “was that a married woman’s legal existence was suspended, or incorporated in that of her husband, and she was said to be in a state of ‘coverture.’ Husband and wife were one, and that one the husband.” Furthermore, “not only could she hold no property in her own right, but she had no rights with regard to her children.”¹¹ The woman became trapped within the private sphere of the home, inextricably tied to children, whom she had no rights to keep, and to a husband who usurped what little rights she had when she was single. Being relegated to the domestic and potential-maternal in marriage and then fully realizing that potential through motherhood was not only a subjugating process, but a silencing one. The role of the husband and the state of the maternal effectively muzzled these mothers. The task for women wanting a change became the search for methods to vocally advocate for their cause.

Suffrage Drama

Women, being one of the most marginalized groups during this period, found their suffrage mission challenging from the very beginning. One major hindrance was the difficulty women faced trying to disseminate news of their struggle to the public, thereby providing inducement for society to join in their fight. Being compelled to remain in the private sphere, communication was limited. Between the mid-nineteenth century and when women obtained the vote in 1920, dramatic performance was utilized to persuade people to choose a position regarding women’s suffrage. Many of the first pieces were pro-suffrage, by women and

¹¹ Porter, *A History of Suffrage*, 138.

unpublished. These plays, monologues and parlor dramas were predominantly filled with female characters making long speeches about the importance of women's enfranchisement and were presented at League and Suffrage meetings to reaffirm their position as women wanting a change. The next phase of suffrage drama, which started in the 1850s and 1860s, included anti-suffrage pieces by both men and women, usually making fun of the New Woman--a feminist term that appeared in the late 19th century to describe progressive women who advocated individual feminine liberty--and depicting her struggles as absurd and fruitless. These plays received much wider success, as the majority followed a more standard, comic script and were published and produced for a public audience. Their popularity was due in part to the fact that the theatre-going audience of the period included men and women (only if accompanied by a man) of bourgeois status. This social caste, in general, wished for the status quo to remain and for the genders to stay in their separate spheres, with their separate occupations. To this sect, voting was a man's occupation. This rise in exposure of anti-suffrage arguments elicited a strong response from pro-suffrage dramatists. Though some continued in the old vein with New Women preaching suffrage sermons to the audience, many decided to break into more comedic forms. This proved to be a smart move, as many more of these plays appear to have acquired attention, thereby better acquainting the public with pro-suffrage reasoning. Though a novel method in pro-suffrage dramatic literature at the turn of the century, humorous devices had already been extensively used in other forms of suffrage propaganda, careful to be of an innocuous composition. The National Women's History Museum gives specific examples:

To make explicit their claim to the vote on the basis of motherhood, American mainstream suffragists also circulated a wide variety of comic postcards and cartoons depicting children. The children were appealing and, as juveniles, inoffensive. Children could get away with expressing impertinent and assertive messages in a way that was not

permitted their mothers. They could "demand" what would otherwise have been unacceptable for an adult woman. In a series of pro-suffrage postcards, the female children appeared assertive, positive, and cooperative. The postcards employed culturally acceptable images such as Uncle Sam and valentines to press their point.¹²

The maternal figure could not advocate for her own rights but the child, who gave her the designation, could do so on her behalf. Thus, comedy served in dramatic and non-dramatic propaganda to soften the pro-suffrage message while the fact of maternal nature (where there is a child, there is a mother) was subtly employed to advocate for voting rights. This study will examine both comedy and the maternal in suffrage drama to see how the former helped to create a separate space for the latter.

The Maternal and Performative Gender

It is, however, imperative to recognize that the mother's struggle for the vote began much earlier. The category of the maternal has endured conflict prior to the women's suffrage campaign and this conflict brought along additional knots I wish to untie. Judith Butler's theory of performative gender provides a lens through which to understand the employment of maternal ideals in both pro- and anti-suffrage plays. In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Butler argues that gender "is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being."¹³ Her assertion about the socially constructed nature of masculine and feminine identity is founded on the premise that such constructed-ness is involuntary on the part of the gendered bodies themselves and yet intentional within the collective cultural consciousness. Butler uses the term "regulative discourses," (also

¹² "The Use of Humor and Children," http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/votesforwomen/tour_02-02w.html

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.

designated “frameworks of intelligibility” or “disciplinary regimes”) to describe the repeated actions that render gendered identity.¹⁴ According to this argument, discursively proscribed actions determine what is socially acceptable, or “natural” when it comes to our gender identification. Butler’s theory helps us understand the stylized actions involved in the specific construction of the maternal, and its representation in suffrage drama.

This theory provides an intriguing perspective from which to approach the maternal in suffrage drama, specifically such literature penned by women. Although I will be employing Butler’s lens more directly when examining the dramatized characters, given the socio-political context of the period, the theory of performative gender also serves to illuminate the stylized actions that were utilized by women differently from men to ensure the success of their writing while still appearing socially “natural.” In other words, the performance of writing these pieces is, in itself, a part of the regulative discourse of the female-gendered body. I argue that the playwrights’ artistic choices within the plays, whether for or against suffrage, were performatively feminine. The writers of these plays used the maternal in different ways, and this helps expose how the construction of the maternal is distinct from the construction of gender.

The female playwrights represented in this investigation created gendered characters from their own socio-cultural experience. Society, in Butler’s argument, allocates specific traits to gendered communities and these can at times stand on their own as a marker for that particular gender identity. One such gender trait that was made the most of by suffrage supporters was femininity’s “natural” morality. Martha Horne Tingey, a noted suffragette and religious authority

¹⁴ Judith Butler borrows the term “regulative discourses” from Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish*.

took advantage of this association in one of her speeches, which was published in *Woman's Exponent*.¹⁵

I have endeavored to show that woman's sphere is not necessarily confined to the home circle but that her Creator designed her to stand as a fellow-helper to man in all the affairs of life. And when she is permitted to take her proper place socially and politically, she will remember the higher platform on which she stands, and act as a magnet to draw society and politics up to her standard of morality, purity and honor.¹⁶

A person's moral actions, then, stood as a part of their gender label, and in this case their maternal designation as well. Within each of the plays in this study, moral judgments are made specifically on the mother, but not always on the woman, since men are also taking on the maternal role. This is further evidence that the maternal can be seen separate from its normal gender association.

To Conclude...and Commence

The three suffrage pieces chosen for this study bring markedly different perspectives with regard to woman's sphere and its influence. Common to each though, is their utilization of the maternal and domesticity in their argument. Ariana Curtis provides us an engaging anti-suffrage satire entitled *The Spirit of '76, or The Coming Woman, a Prophetic Drama* which features a scenario in which women hold positions within the male sphere. In particular, and very aberrant for the period, the mother-character is a judge. *A Very New Woman*, by Alice E. Ives, offers a mother-son relationship as its centerpiece. It is a short, pro-suffrage comedy about overcoming fear, decorum and generational pressures to admit one's pro-suffrage position. Alice C.

¹⁵ *Woman's Exponent* was a semimonthly tabloid, published by a group of Mormon women from 1872-1915. It was owned, edited, and published by women and reported on the work of the three LDS Church auxiliaries, also managed by women--the Female Relief Society, the Young Ladies' MIA, and the Primary Association.

¹⁶ "Speech by Martha Horne Tingey" *Woman's Exponent*, 29.

Thompson's *A Suffragette Baby* gives us another pro-suffrage look at the way women can and do deconstruct what it means to mother, disentangling the role from societal stigmas, while assigning a "natural" status to those with the desire to take it up.

This thesis is structured in four parts. Following this introduction, the first chapter addresses Ariana Curtis's three-act, anti-suffrage satire *The Spirit of '76, or The Coming Woman, a Prophetic Drama*. The second chapter undertakes Alice Ives's piece, *A Very New Woman* and Alice Thompson's *A Suffragette Baby: A Comedy in One Act*. Though the plays are ordered chronologically, I do not intend this study to be a comprehensive review of suffrage arguments or indeed of the pro- and anti- interactive debates. The decision to split into chapters was to better aid the reader in feeling where the pieces were placed in time with regard to the suffrage movement as a whole. The thesis ends with conclusions surrounding the topic of the gendered, but separately maternal category in persuasive and dramatic suffrage arguments.

Chapter One: The Anti-Suffrage Approach to the Maternal

The power of woman is in her dependence, flowing from the consciousness of that weakness which God has given her for her protection, and which keeps her in those departments of life that form the character of individuals and of the nation. [...] But when she assumes the place and tone of man as a public reformer, our care and protection of her seem unnecessary [...] and her character becomes unnatural. If the vine, whose strength and beauty is to lean upon the trellis-work and half conceal its clusters, thinks to assume the independence and the overshadowing nature of the elm, it will not only cease to bear fruit, but fall in shame and dishonor into the dust.¹⁷

This letter excerpt from the Massachusetts Congregationalist Clergy voices the fundamental argument of those opposed to women's suffrage. Written in 1837, this document was one of the earliest expressions of what became the opponents' mantra. As might be expected, this comfortably confident position provided security as the type of anti-suffrage rhetoric changed to include more acerbic language. Anti-suffrage drama, for example, often relied on satirical tactics to make its arguments. *The Spirit of '76 or The Coming Woman, a Prophetic Drama*, by Ariana Randolph Wormeley Curtis, is one of many anti-suffrage plays that uses such methods to postulate how life would be if women did indeed obtain the vote.

Appearing twenty years after "The Declaration of Sentiments" was signed in 1848, *The Spirit of '76* production took place as the American women's suffrage movement was approaching a summit of major action.¹⁸ The year 1868 found Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucy Stone and Henry Blackwell making plans to form the National Woman Suffrage Association and the American Woman Suffrage Association, respectively. The city of

¹⁷ This excerpt is from a pastoral letter from the Massachusetts Congregationalist Clergy, August 1837, addressed to female anti-slavery activists and early feminists.

¹⁸ The Declaration of Sentiments, written by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and modeled after the Declaration of Independence was signed at the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY.

Boston, having already been established as pro-abolition in 1831 with the founding of *The Liberator* newsletter, continued to serve as an epicenter for equal rights during the women's suffrage movement. This campaign was not restricted to periodicals. The opening of the Boston Female Medical School in 1848, the first medical school for women, established Boston as a progressive city on the verge of extending suffrage and challenging assumed gender roles. However the Boston Brahmins (a term given to the population of first family descendants of Boston) took the lead in most political venues, and their power helped to stall the attainment of emancipation for women. It also limited most pro-suffrage voices to privately-expressed ones, such as those of parlor dramas and farces.¹⁹ In contrast, the anti-suffrage dramas were allowed visibility in the amateur and professional theatre scene. The theatre was common entertainment for the wealthy inhabitants of the city, and the parlor drama craze was sweeping the nation among the middle and upper-classes. William Bentley Fowle's *Parlor Dramas, or, Dramatic Scenes for Home Amusement* is a compilation of fifteen such pieces, including his own *Woman's Rights*, an anti-suffrage piece. Many Bostonians would have regularly put on or witnessed these short plays at social functions. These amusements, mainly being anti-suffrage, also served to preach their message about women's suffrage to the choir, since many in this class would have agreed that women belonged in the private, home domain. Although the elite Boston community did not suppress all pro-suffrage messages--as long as they were expressed privately--it was much easier for an anti-suffrage drama to detach itself from the parlor drama genre and achieve

¹⁹ The term "Boston Brahmin" was coined by Oliver Wendell Holmes Sr. in his 1860 *Atlantic Monthly* article entitled "The Brahmin Caste of New England," and refers to the first family descendants of the city. These elite community members were influential leaders in Boston who would have viewed women's suffrage as a scandalous and improper change to gender roles.

more professional prominence within the society, thereby making the anti voice more salient than the pro.

An ironic commentary on the role of women in society, *The Spirit of '76* was “received at every representation with great laughter and applause by large and fashionable audiences.”²⁰ Set in Boston in 1876, it tells the story of Thomas Carberry, a business man who has been living the past ten years in China without any connection to the happenings in America. He has just returned to his home town of Boston and finds, much to his astonishment and eventually chagrin, that women obtained the right to vote in his absence and have voted themselves into every executive office in the city. Arriving back in Boston, the first interaction he has with a female breaks many of the social rules Carberry knew concerning how men and women are supposed to converse. Mrs. Barbara Badger greets him at the railway station, unchaperoned, in what used to be the gentleman’s waiting area. She brazenly inquires about his profession, income, and travel plans. She informs him that she is the Assessor of Internal Revenue for the 5th District. Carberry disregards Mrs. Badger as a singular case of delusion, but is immediately confronted by another woman with equally unfeminine characteristics. Victorine Wigfall enters in shooting-dress, with gun in tow, just having come from some sport with her girlfriends. When Victorine declares that she abhors hunting, Carberry is encouraged to believe she is a truer image of the feminine. She regales him with her interest in studying spiders, however, which brings his confusion back to the forefront regarding women and their pastimes. He learns from Victorine that not only are women working in positions previously held by men, but they have taken the romantic role men held as well. Women are expected to ask men to dance at parties, woo them

²⁰ Classified Advertisement for Selwyn’s Theatre. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, May 2, 1868.

and propose to them. As for men, “the members of that degenerate sex, on the other hand, are nursery maids and rock the cradle when the babies (who are all female, for even infants scorn the masculine gender) cry.”²¹ As the play progresses, Carberry is found to be a desirable husband by three different women. The first is Victorine who wishes to believe she is truly in love with Carberry but is too nervous to propose. The second is Miss Griffin, Victorine’s aunt who, wishing to benefit women’s causes with his wealth, proposes soon after meeting him. The last suitor is Mrs. Badger, the assessor from the beginning of the play. A widow of seven years, she blackmails him over an unfairly billed tax obligation so he will agree to marry her. Carberry finds himself cornered and as he is attracted to Victorine’s “true femininity,” he asks for her hand on the spot, “I came home with the idea of marrying some nice pretty little wife, such as they used to have, --who would make much of me, and give me good dinners, and look pretty at the head of the table,-- which is all a man wants in a wife.”²² This scene is interrupted by Miss Griffin, brandishing two pistols and declaring him a traitor because she believes him to be violating their engagement. In the middle of the ensuing duel, the Judge (Victorine’s mother) enters and arrests both parties for disturbing the peace. At the point of sentencing them each to a twenty-year prison term, the Judge is accosted by Mr. Wigfall, Victorine’s father, the nanny to the baby and the inferior to his spouse, who uses reverse psychology to change his wife’s mind. He exaggerates his show of support for the Judge’s sentence and in response she rescinds her conviction. Mr. Wigfall comments to his daughter, “I have n’t lived twenty years with your mother without finding out that the way to manage her is to give her her head.”²³ The Judge

²¹ “The Spirit of Seventy-Six” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 26, 1868.

²² Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 52.

²³ *Ibid.*, 70.

completes her judgement by giving Victorine permission to marry Carberry. The play ends with both Griffin and Badger denouncing men entirely and the Judge addressing the audience as a jury and charging them to find themselves for or against the defendant, MAN.

Providing gender and maternal commentary, this play elicited the expected response from the period's audience. Since many who shared the anti-suffrage opinion harbored disgust at this type of change and clung to the prevailing societal norms, laughing at the parody of an opposite scenario was easy. The audience, in their gendered hierarchy, propagated the very societal norms celebrated in the play. Butler would label these norms the "disciplinary regimes" that create what the woman's role is in society and what possibilities are available to her. The theory that gender is an entity fabricated through the involuntary performance of social norms, as Butler argues, is an idea that may be extended to include the maternal nature of gender. The play's use of the maternal centers on a judge character, an obvious departure from the normal feminine domain, and yet *The Spirit of '76* capitalizes on other gender frameworks to use this difference in its anti-suffrage argument. This mother-character is not only employed in the law, but further mirrors the male role by assuming prescribed "male" pattern behavior. The Judge is authoritarian toward her children as well as her spouse and pushes her eldest daughter to be like her and follow in her footsteps. When her daughter refuses to study law, the Judge says she'll "have to marry." The Judge's husband is portrayed as put-upon and exhausted with the care of the children and household. This curiously has the dual effect of highlighting that men were not accustomed to, nor perhaps prepared for, what it meant to be a mother/domestic, as well as validating women's complaints about the tiresome nature of certain maternal duties, or "stylized

acts.”²⁴ The fact that the Judge rejects these duties, adopts a more “patriarchal” position and is identified first and foremost by her position as a judge is what makes her so indicative of the gender-reversed world Curtis created. She embodies a role that allows her judgement over her own presentation, thereby subverting traditional career roles thought to be associated with women. The argument that surfaces from this world is that women are not made for the public arena. Seeing the chaos that follows from women performing in the public sphere is supposed to further support the idea that women are made for role of motherhood and must maintain this “natural” position. The audience is taught that if women simply follow this law of nature, they will be preoccupied enough to have no need, desire or ability to vote.

Ariana Curtis’s satire was intended to refute pro-suffrage arguments by way of its commentary on the irrefutability of societal gender associations. The audience found these characters and situations so amusing precisely because of their preposterousness. Curtis’s Boston is a place that suggests if women obtained the vote, they would lose the self-possessed charm that helped to identify their very nature as women. Although progressive in certain arenas, the social structure in Boston at the time of this play’s publication was patriarchal and gender-divided, and this division was arguably more acutely experienced in the mid to late nineteenth century. Underlying the plethora of antithetical maternal and womanly representations in this play is a pivotal commentary on the private maternal condition of the nineteenth century female. Secluded and dominated, her individuality was usurped by her husband as head of the family and “active” member of society. To imagine holding an active position in society, let alone taking it away from the male, was ludicrous. The perception of

²⁴ Ironically, this commentary spoke more to the women of color in most middle and upper-class households who were actually performing the domestic duties that the white male in this play takes on.

absurdity toward women being in possession of not only male accoutrements, such as guns and cigars, but also of their romantic roles, also suggests just how strong the gender hierarchy really was at the time. In addition, although the maternal character expresses extreme views and takes part in unmotherly occupations, one can assume from other period literature and iconography that women actually remained in their private spheres for the most part.

It is precisely through women's experiences, within their historical context, that we arrive at gender designations which are seen as definitive. Butler broaches the idea of challenging these designations by referring back to the very type of movement we are scrutinizing. "The reproduction of the category of gender is enacted on a large political scale, as when women first enter a profession or gain certain rights, or are reconceived in legal or political discourse in significantly new ways."²⁵ The plays covered in this thesis are demonstrating this reproduction by enlarging the woman's sphere and showing the female characters assuming legal and political rights not held by women outside of the dramatic context. Both pro- and anti-suffragists were bending the feminine gender category, but the push that shaped the reconstruction came with the 19th amendment. Reading Curtis's play through this theory draws focus to the meaning that was falsely attributed to the gendered characters, specifically the female ones. It is useful here to refer to Butler's specific delineation of what the bodies must do in order to be assigned the gendered-woman designation.

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have *become* a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman," to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and to do this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project.²⁶

²⁵ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 191.

²⁶ Ibid., 189.

With this “project” involuntarily repeated in society, the gender reversal in the script acquires a poignancy not present at the play’s initial publication.

The subversive potential of this gender commentary was not recognized by the audience at large in 1868. Few would take the political criticism seriously since the play was written by a woman and dealt with the subject of women’s suffrage. The fact that this play maintains any repute at all is astonishing, given its modest beginnings. A great deal of the pro- and anti-suffrage dramatic literature was intended for a private, home audience and was therefore designated “parlor drama.” This classification signified that these were not pieces of consequence. As William Bentley Fowle introduced his compilation of such pieces, “their structure is simple, that their representation might not require much preparation; and most of the subjects are so related to the popular topics of the day.”²⁷ *The Spirit of ’76*, one of these minor private theatricals, unexpectedly secured a three-week professional run at the Sewlyn’s Theatre in Boston, Massachusetts in 1868. In addition, it held a very popular status in print for over three decades, the twenty-third edition being published in 1889.²⁸

The majority of early recognized suffrage dramas are the works of men, women generally not publishing plays until the twentieth century. Having the advantage of being published, these male-written works of primarily anti-suffrage dramas are widely treated as representative of suffrage drama as a whole. Due to the marginal status of parlor dramas as well as the focus on published works by men, the realm of early parlor drama composed and performed by women has drawn comparably little scholarly attention. Pamela Cobrin confronts this issue in her article

²⁷ Fowle. *Parlor Dramas*, iii.

²⁸ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 15.

Actress. She believes the reason for the lack of surrounding discourse on parlor drama is “rooted in the fact that unlike other forms of nineteenth-century American theatre, parlor drama was both ideologically and physically situated within the domestic sphere, a historically under-valued, feminine space.”²⁹ The Boston Brahmins who, in general, undervalued the domestic sphere were apt to censor those who challenged the existing social conditions. They would have had reservations about one of their own--especially a woman--composing a piece about suffrage, regardless of the private performance nature of the genre. It is not surprising, then, that there is some ambiguity surrounding the authorship of *The Spirit of '76*, concerning Ariana Wormeley Curtis and her husband.

In *On to Victory*, Barbara Friedl discusses several parlor dramas, including *The Spirit of '76*. She states that Ariana Wormeley Curtis and her husband, Daniel Sargent Curtis, were both credited with authorship before the play was published. However, both husband and wife, according to Friedl, requested anonymity once the play was set to receive its professional debut. Two other sources, including a review of the play and a biographical monograph, unequivocally state that Ariana Curtis was the sole author of the piece.³⁰ From this contradiction, we can surmise that it was most likely Ariana who initially wrote the play, though it may have required her husband's name to be published and produced.

²⁹ Cobrin. “Dangerous Flirtations,” 385.

³⁰ Henry Austin Clapp, dramatic critic during the latter half of the nineteenth century, wrote the review referred to above about “The Spirit of '76, a comedietta, by Mrs. Daniel Sargent Curtis,” which was compiled in his *Reminiscences of A Dramatic Critic*. The biographical monograph is in reference to Richard Lingner's sketch of Ariana Curtis and her family in Europe (from *Gondola Days*), stating that “after *Spirit of Seventy-Six*, Ariana didn't publish again.” (Which, incidentally, is not true--she published a genealogical work with her sisters in 1879.)

Daniel and Ariana Curtis were an affluent couple in both Boston and European social circles. This fact alone helps frame details about the evolution of parlor drama during this era in American history. As Friedl explains,

The popularization of amateur acting as an exciting new form of amusement for well-to-do Americans soon led from the strictly private parlor theatrical to newly founded drama clubs that staged performances at member's houses, often taking turns so that each member with a parlor large enough to accommodate a temporary stage would receive other members and additional guests for an evening's entertainment."³¹

We can easily presume the Curtises participated in, and perhaps even hosted, these parties in Boston, especially when considering their formation of the Palazzo Barbaro Circle just a few years after leaving America.³²

According to Richard Lingner, "Daniel and Ariana both thought that Europe and European society preserved the values they thought lacking in America."³³ Being a mother herself, her son Ralph being born in Boston in 1854, it does not seem that the values Ariana may have found "lacking" were related to gender schisms. If she wrote her play as a statement against suffrage because it posed a substantial threat to the private sphere of women, one would think her first choice for a place to live would be America, with its Puritanical roots and specific sexual codes. It is evident from additional correspondence that they not only were widely considered liberal-minded, but also continued their theatrical leanings by regularly staging *tableaux vivants* in their home. Daniel Curtis purchased the former Barbaro estate in 1885 and

³¹ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 3.

³² The Palazzo Barbaro Circle was a very prominent club for artists which the Curtises established and hosted in Venice at the palace they started leasing in 1881 and purchased in 1885. Richard Lingner's piece in *Gondola Days* entitled "Daniel and Ariana Curtis in Boston and Venice" states, "The beloved Victorian poet Robert Browning gave his last public reading on Tuesday evening, 19 November 1889, at the Palazzo Barbaro. About twenty-five people were present, and Browning read recent poems." (53) This description strongly parallels parlor drama activities that took place in America at the time.

³³ Lingner, *Gondola Days*, 59.

along with his wife repaired and restored it to receive many artistic virtuosos. This level of influence would suggest that the couple had a similar level of philanthropic puissance in Boston even without the “first family” Brahmin status. This puts Ariana in a more flexible position to pen a piece of suffrage drama which they could feel free to present in their home for friends. Though people of prominence like the Curtises typically took the anti-suffrage position, dramatic exploration of the suffrage topic was not customary of this caste. In particular, a woman’s interpretation was always suspect, in case feminist language emerged into the text.

Perhaps partially due to the Curtises’ social status, reception of the play was positive.

The *Boston Daily Advertiser* found the production to be entertaining, if not particularly complex,

This little *jeu d’esprit*, which has been a good deal talked of in the last few weeks, by those who had been fortunate enough to witness its representation in private, has now been given to the public. [...] The plot of the piece is simple enough, in fact there is none; but the delicate strokes of wit succeed each other with such rapidity, that even the most hardened critic forgets that a plot was ever thought to be a desirable adjunct. The play was written for use in ‘private theatricals,’ and has been several times given by amateurs with such crowning success, that it was rightly judged wrong to hide such a light under a bushel, and the publication was finally assented to.³⁴

Critic Henry Austin Clapp included his review of *The Spirit of ’76* in his *Reminiscences of a Dramatic Critic*. He then supplemented this with additional commentary for the publication of this 1902 book. Although Ariana Curtis’s play was keenly received according to Clapp’s perception of Boston theatre-goers, the reviewer felt the impetus to affirm that,

None of the more extravagant visions have anywhere come even partly true, except in Colorado and three other sparsely populated gynocratic states. Massachusetts is not yet ruled by a “governess”...But Mrs. Curtis’s adumbration of some less violent but highly significant changes was remarkable. She really predicted, in the next sequent generation

³⁴ “The Spirit of Seventy-Six” *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 26, 1868.

of young women, that union of virile athleticism and sophomoric abandon which makes the manners of the twentieth-century girl so engaging.³⁵

According to Mr. Clapp, the thought of having a female adopt a major leadership position, other than the governing of children, should be described as violent. It is also important to note that nowhere in Mr. Clapp's "reminiscences" about *The Spirit of '76* does he label the play a piece of suffrage drama. He groups it together with two other plays in the same season, Charles Read's *Dora* and *Ours* by T. W. Robertson. He refers to Curtis's piece as a "comedietta" and a "delicate burlesque," thereby removing any serious political or social statement attempting to be communicated. To Clapp, this play was a humorous bit of fantasy intended to entertain by virtue of its absurdity. Though it is impossible to paint an entire portrait of a population's sentiment regarding this play based solely upon an individual's opinion, it is within reason to speculate, given our background of Boston in 1868, that this was a common impression.

Curtis stayed within her regulated gender role and Boston-socialite sphere by advocating through her writing for the woman to remain a woman, rather than turn herself into a man. She critiques men, but does it with humor. This naturally disarms her voice and makes it less confrontational, thereby reflecting Gibson-girl femininity--a much sought after impression at this time for most women. Within the play, the female characters use over-the-top and absurd dress, speech and actions to indicate their idea of a natural feminine place. In essence, they reiterate societal truths by playing their opposites. The daughter, who is portrayed as "more womanly" is painted positively when she decries practices typically associated with masculinity. The judge also depicts womanhood, but the follies of womanhood: namely, when a woman tries to be a man, what comes out are the worst parts of a woman. These examples continue to put the female

³⁵ Clapp. *Reminiscences*, 36-37.

back into her “place,” though ironically the play broke out of its private place despite its parlor drama style and female authorship. *The Spirit of '76* was published by Little Brown & Co. in 1868, before the nineteen-day run at Sewlyn’s. It met with a very positive response. “Mrs. D. S. Curtis’s ‘Prophetic Drama,’ *The Spirit of '76*; or, *The Coming Woman*, has won a great reputation for its humor and keen delicate satire,” declared an advertisement for the published script, “Its success in the ‘highest circles’ has been unprecedented. Every lady and gentleman must read it.”³⁶

The issue of the maternal exists in the argument against women exhibiting maleness and wandering outside of their private domain. This subject was frequently utilized by anti-suffrage representatives to enlarge their arsenal and amplify their argument against women receiving the vote. The main argument was that if women were to take on the male occupation of voting, they would neglect their true, proper and natural duties as mother and homemaker for their offspring. The home was labeled the “higher and holier”³⁷ realm, and yet constituted by the public manifestation of the head of the family, the man. If women were to break from their sphere, what would happen to the home and family unit? It is easy to see how this argument could manifest itself into a warning of the destruction of mankind, which was a common theme used in anti-suffrage rhetoric. Some anti-suffragists chose to vilify women with this justification, labeling them horrid and selfish mothers if they chose to pursue suffrage. Others gave it a positive twist, claiming that the great esteem in which they held mothers and maternal duties meant that it was especially important that women not abandon their post.

³⁶ Classified Advertisement for Loring’s Bookseller. *Boston Daily Advertiser*, March 26, 1868.

³⁷ Heb. 13:4.

A common maternal theme used in anti-suffrage literature was one of portraying mother figures with exaggeratedly male characteristics, in order to highlight the anarchy that women's suffrage would inevitably cause if it were to come to pass. In *The Spirit of '76*, we see this tactic used in each of the female characters, described most aptly by Mr. Wigfall, the unfortunate husband who has been relegated to the role of nursery maid, "They're lawyers, ministers, tax-gatherers,--everything that's disagreeable!"³⁸ Victorine, for purposes of the drama, does not fit this claim because she must be the most truly feminine for Carberry to fall in love with her. With names such as "Miss Wolverine Griffin" and "Mrs. Badger" indicating the primitive level women have "sunk" to, Curtis at the same time asserts that "the ladies had gone to the front in America" both politically and socially. Though not the most grotesquely masculine, but definitely quite male-characterized, is Susan Wigfall, known in the play as "the Judge." Though the only mother represented in the script, the Judge is perhaps the least stereotypically maternal character. There is no doting, no concessions, no understood female connection between her daughter and herself. She is the dictator. Though it would not have been out of place to see a father play this role,--in fact it may have been quite boring--women were not normally portrayed behaving in such a manner within dramatic literature perhaps for fear of disrupting the gender stereotype of more overtly affectionate women as mothers.

We see evidence from newspaper editorials from the era that the icon of a baby calling for its mama's suffrage was used in pro-suffrage propaganda. Using this non-threatening imagery was a brilliant move by the suffragists and one that made it quite difficult for the anti-suffrage factions to counteract. A tactic that became popular and effective for suffrage opponents was the

³⁸ Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 9.

erasure of the child. Children are generally absent in their propaganda. This strategy may have been employed in order to, on the one hand, dispel any empathy people held toward suffragists with babies and, on the other, put the focus on the adult mother in the act of abandoning her offspring. This would place emphasis on the negative action rather than the mother herself, which could backfire and remind the audience of pro-suffrage propaganda. In *The Spirit of '76*, the baby is present, but that presence is linked to that of the male parent. The nurturing hand extended by Mr. Wigfall serves the dual purpose of extolling fathers for their generosity and love of their children--though in reality the father would most likely be absent from the child's home life--and, humorously, victimizing the father within the very sphere they wish to force the women back into.

The reversal of gender roles within this play continues to emphasize the importance of women staying at home as it discloses women's fears by giving those fears to the men. We see this in Act II when Carberry, visiting his friend Mr. Wigfall, is accosted by Miss Griffin.

MISS GRIFFIN. Pray, sir, what are Mrs. Carberry's political convictions?

CARBERRY. Madam, I have the misfortune to be unmarried.

MR. WIGFALL. Stick to it Tom,--stick to it! *Returns to his baby.*

MISS GRIFFIN. Unmarried! That will never do. No doubt you feel the isolation of your lot,--unfitted as you are by nature to struggle with the rude world alone.³⁹

By placing the female gender within the private sphere, the consequence follows that assumptions of the fear of the world reside within those females. As they continue the regulative discourse of their home life, they are propagating the idea that they do not wish to be removed from their space. The only recourse is marriage--yet another culturally imposed regime that

³⁹ Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 14.

carries with it further responsibilities, or discourses, that further delimit the boundaries of what the female may claim for herself. It is necessary to start with the marriage tradition, since that is the culturally groomed space for the maternal to reside--at least without rancor from the public sphere.

The opposite tactic is used in order to emphasize the ridiculousness of women being in a position of power. Two particular weaknesses are highlighted in the Judge, thereby not only commenting that men have these tendencies but that women are at risk of acquiring them if they enter into powerful positions. These two flaws are her proneness to changing her convictions, and her unscrupulous reasons for doing so.

MR. WIGFALL. How often did you change your mind today?

JUDGE. Mr. Wigfall, I never change my mind.

MR. WIGFALL. Oh, fie, fie! Judges shouldn't tell fibs. Didn't I go to hear you try your first case?

JUDGE. I take no notice of idlers who hang round the Court-room.

MR. WIGFALL. And didn't you first charge the jury to be sure and let the poor devil off, --and when they had been out ten minutes, didn't you send for them back, on second thoughts, and charge them all over again to convict him?

JUDGE. Mr. Wigfall, you cannot be expected to understand the intricacies of the law. During the interval you allude to, I was informed by Mrs. Attorney-General Talker that the prisoner in question had been a noted and violent opponent of the Emancipation of Women.⁴⁰

The Judge's maternal role is negated through this transformation of the female character, and is instead converted into a combination of the dictator-father and lacking-female. Her authoritarian stance belies her supposedly tacit femininity or delicate emotional state. The absence of any

⁴⁰ Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 16.

fondness toward her spouse contradicts the softer, womanish qualities that society would claim should be innate. This has moved the Judge into a new category, perhaps even a new gender, because of the new discourses she is adopting. Despite her outward attempts to appear male gendered, it is her failings at succeeding in the public sphere that relegate her once more to the female. Presumably in order to prevent reversal of what most of the female characters in the play see as “the great change,” the Judge focuses energy on the propagation of the new gendered culture in her own family. The Judge wishes her eldest daughter to follow in her footsteps, but when Victorine shows herself to be uninterested in the prospect, she bewails her position as the misused guardian and provider,

JUDGE. (*mournfully*) Victorine, you will break your mother’s heart! You have the finest opening of any girl in Boston,--and the best example,--and if you loved your Blackstone, and your Cruise’s Digest, you might become, like me, the ornament of the Suffolk Bar. But who do you suppose would ever give *you* a brief? You don’t deserve to be my daughter,--and the end of it will be, you’ll have to marry,--you are not fit for anything better! [*Bursting into tears*]⁴¹

The Judge resists the maternal, even going so far as to reject the unseemly title: “I wish you would give up calling me ‘Mamma.’ It is unsuited to my present dignity.” Even at home, in private, the Judge wears her robes of office in order to inspire respect and remind her household and family to refer to her as “Your Honor” at all times.

Any suggestion of the Judge’s motherly side before she entered the law is generally hushed by the Judge herself. The few exceptions include generalized intimations by Mr. Wigfall of how life used to be and more specifically, exclamations by Victorine about her mother’s behavior. At the end of the play, the Judge is on the point of putting Carberry in jail and Victorine pleads with her mother to be “a dear mamma” and not arrest him. After the Judge

⁴¹ Curtis, *The Spirit of ’76*, 22.

relents, Victorine expresses her relief, “Oh you dear little mamma! I knew you’d stop being an upright Judge, and turn out my own kind little mamma at last.”⁴² It is interesting to note the duplicity seen in nineteenth century Boston culture, which revered uprightness as a proper construction in the male, but horribly wrong in the female. And yet, women were purported to be the culture’s moral compass.

This play and its maternal themes come into focus under our performative gender lens for as Butler asserts, the sexed body has a necessity to be reconceived since it is culturally constructed. This is easily viewed within the culture of the play, but also in the culture within which this play was written. Carberry’s expectations when he arrives back in Boston are born from desires that originated in a former culture. With this context, the scenarios and characters are easier to understand since those witnessing the action took part in constructing those gender roles. Part of the ludicrous nature of this piece stems from the fact that Curtis has given us what Butler might see as a fast-forwarded version of events. Understood by the contemporary audience to be unattainable, the events and characters in *The Spirit of ’76* were received with the serenity that unmistakably comes from the security of their culture’s perceived constancy. The female and the maternal would forever remain as they knew it to be, apart from the male world. However, using what we know about the historical construction of gender roles, we can see that though perhaps impossible in their rapid evolution, there is no reason to believe these events to be out of our reach. Today’s Boston is a testament to the change Butler outlines in her references to historical change within the gender performance. Gradually our script is changing, and yet we

⁴² Curtis, *The Spirit of ’76*, 66.

can still see the reflection of Curtis's critical truths that assert we are still within a predominantly gender-divided culture.

The Spirit of '76 paints us a humorous, but at times biting commentary on what we attribute to the female, and consequently the maternal. A satire by nature abuses specific societal groups in order to embarrass an audience and, ideally, change their ways. Curtis's use of double entendre emphasizes her satirical commentary on the social spheres of *both* women and men. This curious aspect of her play makes it unique among anti-suffrage comedies. While most satires choose one specific group to censure, or side to support, Curtis strikes at both. Many pieces of anti-suffrage literature target suffragettes, but rarely do they also include derogatory commentary on the oppressive and dictatorial nature of men, which is normally capitalized on by the pro-suffragists, and not humorously. No one is safe from ridicule in *The Spirit of '76*.

Considering the play's plot, its structure, and insinuations appropriate to the period, coupled with the explications of the author, we uncover not controversy, but the need for clarification about the intent of the piece. It is stated in the introduction to *The Spirit of '76*, that the farce "was not written for the stage, nor with any view to publication, but simply for amateur performance; and therefore all scenery, stage-properties, &c., were purposely dispensed with, and the action limited by the resources of a drawing-room."⁴³ If Ariana or her husband were anti-suffragists, they were not eager to use their farce to promote their cause publicly. This hesitancy could be because the play had more than just an anti-suffrage message. Mrs. Curtis was more even-handed in her writing about the negative traits on both sides of the gender schism than most suffrage writers which, to a certain extent, forced the audience to hold man just as

⁴³ Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 5.

responsible for his actions as woman. In the play, the Judge's permission for her husband to maintain some of his rights gives a very unflattering impression of her as a woman of the day. "I say, I shall tolerate you in your proper sphere, and never countenance the popular doctrine of the complete Mental and Moral Inferiority of Man. I shall always be ready to guarantee your Equal Rights."⁴⁴ However, by virtue of the female characters representing typical male roles, this also points the finger at men for being tactless in their attitudes toward women. Mr. Carberry's exclamations paint men quite harshly. "I shall go directly back to China....It's the only country fit to live in, -- they drown the superfluous females young!"⁴⁵ So though it is arguably an anti-suffrage piece in its satirization of the female role attaining the right to vote, it is not anti-female or entirely bent on keeping women to a specific, usually private, sphere. Curtis's censorship of both genders supports the claim that "the play does not necessarily ridicule higher education or positions of responsibility for women. Rather, it satirizes universal role reversal as a ludicrous possibility, and its sarcasm attacks those 'deluded females' who attempt to cover their own undesirability or incompetence with the authority of the new movement."⁴⁶ The professional run *The Spirit of '76* attained gave it a pedestal, and with that, a presumed authority against the cause of women's suffrage. Though early in the movement, this topic was already being capitalized on in several newspaper articles, journals and books at the time. The treatment and reception of such an issue with a satiric piece gave the audience commentary that they could absorb without realizing they were being taken in.

⁴⁴ Curtis, *The Spirit of '76*, 39.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 47. Though meant as a joke in this play, this statement is referring to the real female infanticide that took place in China due to its practice of sex-selection. In Fung Yu-Lan's *A History of Chinese Philosophy*, he quotes a law written in the 3rd century B.C. by philosopher Han Fei Tzu, "As to children, a father and mother when they produce a boy congratulate one another, but when they produce a girl they put it to death."

⁴⁶ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 16.

The Spirit of '76 provides us an important window through which to view a turbulent movement. Although one could easily read Ariana Curtis as a material feminist given her position in society, her freedoms and manner of living, this did not extend to the suffrage movement. She enjoyed a marriage of equality, though she surpassed her husband in being published, but she felt no sympathy toward women who wished to obtain the right to vote. Her successful satire helped promote the contemporary commentary that women have a place to hold in society, and that place is not man's. Uniquely, it was equally critical that the male persona could not adopt a woman's sphere either. Curtis seems to be advocating that the private has just as much importance as the public, which was not the norm for anti-suffrage satires.

The women's suffrage movement, by its very naming, has been coded as a gendered campaign. Within the many roles of the feminine-gendered woman, the maternal stands out as an anchored source of gendered data that remains in force today, disseminating how the "natural" woman should act. Such a mainstay within the feminine gender could not be overlooked when the status quo of a powerful culture was challenged. So it is not surprising that within Curtis's satire, she utilizes the maternal form for her own purposes, to refute the suffrage argument. This same role is also the site for an anticipated severing of the maternal from the feminine which we will see is a potential step towards reducing the power gender lays claim to, especially within dramatic literature.

Chapter Two: The Pro-Suffrage Approach to the Maternal

The new woman, in the sense of the best woman, the flower of all the womanhood of past ages, has come to stay — if civilization is to endure. The sufferings of the past have but strengthened her, maternity has deepened her, education is broadening her — and she now knows that she must perfect herself if she would perfect the race, and leave her imprint upon immortality, through her offspring or her works.⁴⁷

In answer to the antis' attempts to invalidate the suffrage cause by displaying grotesque masculinization of women, those in favor of women's suffrage turned to creating positive images of the female gender in an effort to accentuate their worthiness to shoulder the voting responsibility. The suffragettes' removal of the anti-suffrage male mask gave birth to a phenomenon called the "New Woman," a feminist conception that came out in the late nineteenth century and challenged patriarchal culture. Charlotte Despard, British-born novelist and suffragist, writes of how she sees the New Woman entering the modern scene of life,

Stately and beautiful in the fulness of her development, for this, I believe will be the first fruits of her freedom; bearing and rearing, no longer in sorrow, but in joy, a truly imperial race; independent in thought, convincing in speech, vigorous in action--for now she has thrown off those affectations and disloyalties which generations of accepted inferiority had built into her nature; having honourable and useful careers open to her, so that marriage shall no longer be an economic necessity, but a life deliberately entered upon with full sense of responsibility to the race.⁴⁸

The prevailing sentiment among most American suffragists at the turn of the century echoed that of British women in their own suffrage struggle. Namely, the law was wrong. According to the Common Law of England, "a woman is not a person in matters of rights and privileges, but she

⁴⁷ Cooley. *The New Womanhood*, 31.

⁴⁸ Despard. *Woman in the New Era*, 51.

is a person in matters of pains and penalties.”⁴⁹ A major challenge that the New Woman faced in America was how to deal with the prevailing feminine image that dominated the contemporary culture--that of the Gibson Girl. Originating from the illustrations of Charles Dana Gibson, the Gibson Girl was a standard of beauty and poise that predominated media and merchandise in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The principal characteristics of her nature were impeccable beauty and the desire to find a mate and adopt a maternal role, although she was on occasion depicted attending college. Her image was antithetical to the pro-suffrage movement because of its associations with female passivity and limited independence. However, it was necessary for suffrage supporters to tread lightly when it came to subverting such a significant icon. Pro-suffrage propaganda attempted to promote the New Woman as a newer version of the Gibson Girl. However, contradictory depictions from the antis hindered acceptance of this pro-suffrage appropriation of the feminine symbol. In her book, Martha Patterson highlights significant ethnic, regional, and socio-political dimensions in the idea of the New Woman at the turn of the twentieth century. She comments,

As a suffragette, for example, the New Woman might be called unattractive, barren, neglectful, and manly, doomed to the rank of spinster, shrewish wife, neglectful mother or housekeeper. In an article for the New York World entitled “Here Is the New Woman” (1895), the newspaper presents [...] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Susan B. Anthony, Francis Willard, Belva Lockwood, and the minister and suffrage leader Anna Howard Shaw. In the accompanying article, the writer concedes that the composite face is “strong” and “intellectual” but laments its “stern, unyielding” aspect...⁵⁰

Given the negative images associated with strong women, it became necessary to find another angle from which to promote women’s suffrage without catering to subjugating images of superficial beauty. This angle was to appropriate feminine behavior. A major argument used by

⁴⁹ Common Law of England. This is an excerpt from the act of 1876.

⁵⁰ Patterson. *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 27.

the anti-suffragists was that “the New Woman might be accused of exercising her mind at the expense of her reproductive capabilities”⁵¹ The counter-attack by pro-suffragists was to capitalize on the honorable qualities of the maternal role and its influence. This tactic was useful in several ways, given the deference shown to mother figures within the home, as well as within men’s psyches. The logical course of action was to dismantle what the maternal represented, down to its specific duties. This is an example of what Butler defines as the “stylized acts” that are at work through history. In this instance, we see the extent to which the maternal becomes part of the social construction of the feminine gender. Maternity and the feminine gender were inextricably linked, indeed biologically so at this time, and the former was often seen as the reason for woman’s weakness. Since all of a woman’s strength must go to the child, women can not, and should not for honor’s sake, retain any for themselves.

The power of the female gender existed by virtue of stylized actions repeatedly performed on a daily basis; therefore, those very actions needed to be highlighted and featured as important. Predictably, these repeated actions took place mainly in the private sphere of the home and included maternal and domestic duties. In a risky move, pro-suffragists began extending these maternal frameworks into the public sphere, a sphere normally inhabited by men. They argued that women could transfer the same duties they performed in the private sphere to the public arena. In fact, according to their reasoning, it was their duty to do so. Since women were gender-coded in the role--presumably given by nature--of nurturing mothers, didn’t our society need that nurturing on a larger scale, beyond the home? If cleaning and maintaining order and peace were necessities of home life, weren’t they were just as necessary in

⁵¹ Patterson. *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, 28.

government? "Social housekeeping" was the name given to this idea that the duties of the home performed by women should be extended to society at large.⁵² Drawing parallels between housekeeping and politics, women extended their influence outward from the home into the public sphere, employing images promoting protection of the home, and the "cleaning up" of "dirty politics" through "social housekeeping." As Jane Addams would announce, "Politics is housekeeping on a grand scale."⁵³ If women were allowed to vote they would be able to purify and care for the nation on a larger scale than men ever could, since the masculine gender did not possess these natural, maternal traits.

Among the greater challenges for suffrage supporters was to portray female characters actually succeeding in this venture to "tidy up" the public sphere. The performative nature specific to amateur theatre lent itself well to dramatic pieces which focused attention on emancipated women who, unlike the anti-suffrage satirical characters, retained their "natural" feminine and maternal identities. Two of such pro-suffrage pieces are *A Very New Woman*, by Alice E. Ives (1896) and *A Suffragette Baby* by Alice C. Thompson (1912). In addition to appealing to their audience through humor, these two one-acts provided an alternative picture against those who believed the female gender would be lost if women won the vote. The audience for these dramas, subjected outside the theatre to the anti-suffrage voice, could inside these parlors enjoy something they had a vested interest in, given that they helped to construct it. The main characters in these two plays reinforce specific traits of the feminine gender stereotype

⁵² Suffragette Jane Addams explained the idea of "social housekeeping" in an 1909 article in *Ladies Home Journal* entitled, "Why Women Should Vote." This idea sprang from several associations made before Addams wrote her article, including one early supporter of women's suffrage, Elizabeth Boynton Harbert, who referred to the State as a larger family and claimed that "in this national home there is a room...and a duty for 'mother.'" This last quote is taken from *History of Woman Suffrage*, Vol. 3, pages 78-79.

⁵³ "Motherhood and Social Housekeeping," http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/votesforwomen/tour_02-02k.html
http://www.nwhm.org/online-exhibits/votesforwomen/tour_02-02u.html

that suffrage opponents were afraid would be destroyed. *A Very New Woman* depicts New Women who are still submissive to a male, and *A Suffragette Baby* shows women who cannot suppress their “natural” and gender-coded call to motherhood. The audiences of these pieces enjoyed a non-threatening, entertaining piece of theatre, while hopefully being encouraged to advocate for “true” women to have the right to vote. However, due to the reticence of major theatre managers to put on plays with such an unpopular message, not many pro-suffrage comedic dramas were produced professionally. Though perhaps not as opulent as professional venues, the amateur theatre scene at this time was very active, and women playwrights were increasing in number.

The late nineteenth century not only saw thousands of theaters built in the United States, but also the formation and growth of many theatrical clubs which put on amateur performances of primarily shorter plays for avid audiences. By the beginning of the twentieth century, vaudeville theaters were opening all over America, offering mostly comedic and musical entertainment. If any woman--let alone suffragette--wished to write for the stage, they had to compete with vaudeville and many other non-serious forms of pageantry. Perhaps the greatest competition was the rise of film in the early part of the twentieth century. The challenge for these female writers was to find the kind of dramatic genre and style that would captivate an audience while still delivering their message. What inevitably surfaced was that humor and simplified, happy endings worked best to draw a crowd in and keep them coming back.

Early American female playwrights were quite influential even though there is minimal scholarship about them. Zoe Desti-Demanti, one of the few authorities in this area, explains that early women dramatists were “affected by major social events, like the War of Independence, the

industrial revolution, abolitionism and the first women's movements," and thus they "centered their work around urgent social issues and changing ideological and cultural values."⁵⁴ The tradition continued into the turn of the twentieth century, when women found themselves on the cusp of attaining emancipation and equal voting rights. The stage became a safe soap box from which ladies could project their visions of suffrage without the demonization normally exercised toward more direct "demonstrators."⁵⁵ In a very performative way, these playwrights were constructing their gender by their choice to dramatize rather than protest. In addition, Ives and Thompson manufactured their female role by way of their comedic applications, which softened their pro-suffrage arguments.

Alice Emma Ives writes her *New Woman* with disarming qualities that help the persuasive argument for women's enfranchisement. *A Very New Woman* opens with Mrs. Curtis Twillington awaiting the arrival of her son Arthur, who is coming to introduce his fiancé. He and his bride-to-be, Miss Edith Parker, arrive and Edith is sent with a maid to help her off with her wraps. In the mother and son chat that follows, Mrs. Twillington asks Arthur if his fiancé is a New Woman. Mrs. Twillington prides herself on her progressive views of women deserving the right to vote and work as they choose. Arthur replies that Edith is not, but that she is a "dear housewifely little thing" and he appears aghast at his mother's suggestion to the contrary. Begging his mother not to talk this way in front of his betrothed, Arthur declares his belief that Edith would be quite shocked at his mother's progressivism and might perhaps back out of their engagement. Once Edith returns, it is revealed through some humorous dialogue that she is

⁵⁴ Desti-Demanti. *Early American Women Dramatists*, 4.

⁵⁵ This "demonstrators" is referring to the suffrage supporters who continued to advocate via the sermonize, or lecture method or who held public demonstrations.

indeed a New Woman. She attends women's suffrage meetings, serves as recording secretary to the Woman's League, and pursues a career in law. Afraid Arthur would not wish to marry her if he knew, she has been hiding all this from him. When the truth comes out, Edith offers to leave Arthur. He insists, however, that he still earnestly wishes to marry her. During Arthur's avowal of love, he embraces her as a suffragette, giving her permission to vote and study law as much as she likes. The play ends happily with the prospect of a long marriage that is supported by a friendship between a mother and daughter-in-law that share ideologies and the partnership between a husband and wife in a legal practice.

On the surface, this piece is humorous in its absurdity. Although Arthur has been raised by a progressive woman, he prefers the more traditionally domestic woman, with her housewifely-ness. Amazingly, this does not cause any strife between the mother and son. In fact, it is his wish that his mother and fiancé meet--despite the fact that his mother could "rub off" on his new bride. In addition, Mrs. Twillington easily acquiesces to her son's wish that she remain mute about her feminist views, thereby completely contradicting what she believes in. After the secret is finally out that Edith herself is a suffragette, the play miraculously ends happily with an unlikely combination of marriage, progressivism and familial unity. However, underneath this superficial story lies a great deal of commentary on the role of gender (and consequently the maternal) in suffrage drama. These absurdities, after all, were gratifying to an audience who was secure in its gender identification. This security is demonstrated in the society's severely patriarchal, gender divided, existence. Each of the characters act appropriately for the period's understood precepts regarding how "proper" and "natural" men and women behave. The unrealistically happy ending nudges the audience, reminding them this was only a

show. The reception of *The Spirit of '76*, the play examined in the first chapter of this thesis, is almost a reversal of these interpretations: the relief at it being only a play comes instead from a reaction to the “unnatural” way the men and women characters are portrayed. The conclusion, in which a “normal” man marries a “true” woman, fortified the audience’s assertion that the “natural” gender code would always triumph.

The maternal is handled with a different gender-coded approach in this pro-suffrage play than it was with the anti-suffrage piece in the last chapter. We learn about the maternal through the gendered *reactions* of the characters. The mother’s reactions to her situation and the other characters’ reactions toward the mother piece together a silhouette of the maternal, rather than the outline provided by the commentary of Curtis’s piece. In other words, *The Spirit of '76* talks “around” the topic of the maternal--this commentary evolving from the gender reversal--in order to define its space, thereby defining the maternal to be an entity in its own right. *A Very New Woman*, on the other hand, gives us the maternal placed in its gender-accepted position within the female. We see the reactions come directly from those maternal bodies, which defines for us the interior space of the maternal, thereby showing this entity to be moveable as a corporeal form. An example of these reactions from within the maternal in *A Very New Woman* would be the numerous asides of the women characters. Mrs. Twillington and Edith speak their minds privately well before, and sometimes in lieu of, speaking to the other character(s) on stage. Arthur, however, has none of these asides. Both of the women are given motherly attributes and labels, Edith being called “housewifely” and Mrs. Twillington of course being Arthur’s mother. Their reticence to speak openly accentuates their dutiful acquiescence to their male superior and

current head of the family, while filling out their private, womanly and maternal space from which they may voice their New Woman ideology.

The title “New Woman” emerged in the 19th century and is closely associated with the plays of Henrik Ibsen. Though it would seem a proper term for the progressive women who were fighting for the right to vote, “the epithet at first had a negative, or at least critical, implication, characterizing a woman as brash, self-centered, or even irresponsible.”⁵⁶ There are almost thirty known plays--on both sides of the suffrage issue--that use this term in their title. George Rugg’s *A New Woman*, for example, is an anti-suffrage piece that utilizes some of the same tactics Curtis employs in *The Spirit of ’76*. The argument in Rugg’s piece relies on the revulsion toward females who have lost traits that define or gender-code them as women, namely subservience, modesty, and deference to men. In Rugg’s play, much as it was in Curtis’s, the women are portrayed as outrageously masculine. The difference in Rugg’s anti-suffrage argument is its slightly more acerbic ending. Rugg victimizes the husband’s character from the beginning and makes sure that he gets the last laugh at the women’s expense. A rat is found and the man is the only one brave enough to kill it, thereby reestablishing his dominance as the stronger member, and rightful leader, of the household.

Alice Ives’s pro-suffrage comedy, *A Very New Woman*, lacks the potency of satire, and yet perhaps takes a safer position by virtue of its lightness. Though both Curtis and Ives held affluent positions within their communities, Curtis could use satire because she was speaking to a larger, anti-suffrage crowd. Ives, on the other hand, trying to deliver a pro-suffrage message to an anti-suffrage audience, takes a gentler approach. Ives catches her flies with honey by using a

⁵⁶ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 22.

light, feel-good, happily-ending, comedy to lull the audience in to a state of contentment. By making her suffragette characters reticent about the expression of their heretical beliefs, she delivers her argument for suffrage in the gentlest manner possible. This reassures the audience that they are viewing respectable women who are at least appropriately ashamed of their cause.

The mother, Mrs. Twillington, dutifully obeys her son by keeping her views to herself, with one exception. Perhaps a throwback to the earlier suffrage dramas that included prolonged speeches about the New Woman, Ives gets her point across through a much briefer progressive-feminine nugget,

MRS. TWILLINGTON. Oh, well, there's no use dodging the point. You know very well I'm an advanced woman. I believe in a woman earning her own living, if she wants to, in any legitimate way under the sun. I believe in her privilege to improve herself physically and mentally up to the highest point of which any human being is capable. I believe in her right to the ballot, and to any office on the face of the earth to which a human being is eligible and which she is fitted to fill.⁵⁷

This statement is made in the privacy of the mother-son tête-à-tête. Arriving unaccompanied to meet her son's fiancé, one can assume she is a widow and therefore the appropriate, or "natural," behavior would be to yield to her eldest son's wishes. This is why she does not initially proclaim her progressive position to Edith. It is my assertion that Ives specifically used the mother-son relationship in order to relate to the anti-suffrage men who may view her play. Though these men may be against women's suffrage, they can still relate to having a mother, and to the effect of a mother's influence. The comment about Edith being housewifely, an attribute that many associate with the maternal, reiterates the notion that sons endeavor to marry women who will take care of them: namely, imitations of their mother. Edith's secret suffrage position, once revealed, only aligns her more with Arthur's mother, and thereby with his true desire. Edith is

⁵⁷ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 139.

willing and able to do many housewifely or domestic duties, as she did for her younger siblings growing up. This indicates that she is obviously capable of raising a family. Ives also negotiates Edith's desire to learn and work in the public sphere by creating in Edith a propensity toward the law, coincidentally the same occupation as her future husband. Ives paints the pictures of two women who can maintain the gender-coded maternal status while still being suffragettes. This tactic is a part of what separates the maternal from the feminine in this play. The New Woman, coded masculine by some and simply non-feminine by others, is represented both by Mrs. Twillington and Edith. Ives then takes the maternal cloak and demonstrates how it still fits a dubiously gendered body. In other words, the fact that both of these women characters can proclaim New Woman status and yet still be tied to the feminine in their choices regarding marriage and children shows the maternal to be a moveable and *removeable* label.

The maternal acts in this play are spoken about more than actually performed onstage, the exception being Mrs. Twillington and Edith's embrace at the end, effectively representing the adoption of an orphan by a widow and enabling the audience to sympathize more with both characters. Interestingly, this creation of widow and orphan has another purpose--that of empowerment. With Mrs. Twillington's husband and Edith's father deceased, both of these women are free from the shackles of the men who would normally direct their lives. Erasure of Arthur's father puts the authority of this nature on the only parent left, thereby emphasizing that it is a woman forming the new generation. A man raised by a suffragette who did not turn out "unnatural" is further proof that one can be progressive and vote and still be a maternal figure to your children. Giving Edith the necessity of earning money on her own makes her pitiable and her desire to be joined with a man in marriage is the natural choice for her gender. If any alarm

can be generated from her progressive position, it is easily accounted for by the fact that this poor young orphan had a less-than-nurturing upbringing herself.

Keeping the historical nature of gender construction in mind when viewing this play and its publication, we see even more clearly the deferment which helps to categorize the subjugated female. In a sense, Alice Ives is writing with a man's voice, or at least within her contemporaries' convictions regarding the performance of the female gender. This creates a play that further reiterates what the feminine was considered to be at the turn of the twentieth century. Bettina Friedl asserts that this "little sketch by Ives describes Edith as the ideal type of the New Woman, who is sweet and feminine yet independent, modest and shy yet intellectually curious and determined to succeed in her profession."⁵⁸ In essence, Edith is the ideal unification of Gibson Girl and New Woman. Ives layers her suffrage argument between hitting the necessary gender mores that helped to make her play acceptable. Within her argument is also the assertion that it is the female's duty to aid the public realm with their naturally maternal natures. This blend of "social nurturing" promotion and female acquiescence to male judgement is a gentle but clever way of addressing generational unity among women and their dependence on men to create a hospitable world for the New Woman. In order for suffrage to be won, women must work together on all levels. Mothers must hone their influence over their sons and young women must not lose their traditional behavior, lest the men who will support their future independence abandon the women's cause.

Many of the plays written by women prior to the suffrage movement "greatly resembled the conduct books, or advice manuals for women that were being profusely published in America

⁵⁸ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 24.

at that time, as they tended to emphasize the proper behavior of young ladies, the observance of etiquette, religious values and domestic principles.”⁵⁹ Ives wrote one of these social handbooks, entitled, *Our Society: A Complete Treatise of the Usages that Govern the Most Refined Homes and Social Circles*. This tome reveals Ms. Ives’s interest in not only proper societal behavior, but in the maternal figure specifically. “The mother’s influence is incalculable, and deserves the careful reflection of every individual, for it lies at the foundation of all future work.”⁶⁰ It is very clear to see the character development of Mrs. Curtis Twillington’s influence over her son within the pages of this handbook that categorically states, “The future of men will be what mothers make them.”⁶¹ Ives brilliantly aligns the role of the mother not with subjugation, but with the power of the Creator, while still maintaining consideration of the traditional maternal duties. Judith Butler may say that Alice Ives subverts her femininity in this way by casting a fierce spotlight on those same “regulative discourses” that created the gender and its space.

Alice E. Ives was born in Detroit, Michigan. Her father died when she was two years old so she “very early felt the necessity of earning her own bread.”⁶² Along with several other articles and stories which she sent to various periodicals, she published her play *A Very New Woman* in *The Woman’s Column* IX, No. 11 on March 14, 1896. *The Woman’s Column* was a weekly four-page subscription journal sponsored by the American Woman Suffrage Association. This play was one of the publications at the turn of the century voicing a position about the emancipation of the marriage and the family. This movement, overshadowed by the enormity of

⁵⁹ Desti-Demanti, *Early American Women Dramatists*, 7.

⁶⁰ Ives, *Our Society*, 368.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁶² Willard. *A Woman of the Century*, 412.

suffrage arguments, was pushing for equality between spouses and a change in the way motherhood and family life were approached. Its aims were to acknowledge that women possessed intelligence that could be put to use outside the home and that husbands had a duty to aid their wives in this emancipation and to help them reach their intellectual goals.

Primarily a journalist, publishing articles and dramatic criticisms, including a very successful magazine piece entitled “The Domestic Purse-Strings,” Ms. Ives was also a prolific writer of plays. The most successful of these was *Lorine*, which was produced at Palmer’s Theatre in New York. Though less lucrative, *A Very New Woman* established her as a feminine suffragette, which was not an easy accomplishment given how opponents delivered their argument. In addition to her social handbook, she wrote another book on etiquette in 1886 entitled, *Social Mirror*, which gave guidance and advice on things such as how a woman ought to properly acknowledge a gentleman she sees on the street. Ives’s interest in proper decorum within the social sphere is very intriguing, though not entirely unique, to see in a supporter of women’s suffrage.

The year before this play was published, Elizabeth Cady Stanton wrote *The Woman’s Bible*, which deals with the subservient position women were subjugated to in the original text, and posits what actually was meant by the Creator. A signed copy was given to Alice Ives with an inscription by Ms. Stanton, “Miss Alice E. Ives, compliments of Elizabeth Cady Stanton born November 12, 1815: 'Genesis Chapter I says man and woman were a simultaneous creation. Chapter II makes woman an afterthought. What is true?'”⁶³ This question was the catalyst for many women during the suffrage movement to question the origin of their gender. And from

⁶³ Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, back of front cover.

this, naturally stemmed the examination of the maternal. If woman had given birth to the New Woman in the 1860s, the New Woman at the turn of the century was starting to deliver the New Mother. Ives's maternal characters, Mrs. Twillington and Edith, are personifications of this ideal and their relationships with Arthur mark a turning point in maternal feminism.⁶⁴

Emmet Densmore in his 1907 book, *Sex Equality, A Solution of the Woman Problem*, explains the dangerous position of the mother-son relationship, threatening to change due to any augmentation of women's status.

Boys emerging from childhood are quick to discern this disparity [that of the difference in men and women's minds]. The mother, when adequately equipped, can not fail to be a most potent force in molding her son's mind and forming his character. During the first ten years of the boy's life, the mother's influence is apt to dominate. Thereafter, he becomes aware of his mother's limitations; his affection remains, but he now finds himself engrossed in activities and pursuing lines of thought to which women, until recent years, have been strangers; and so the mother's influence wanes.⁶⁵

Ives represents this delicate relationship between Arthur and Mrs. Twillington especially well during several of the mother's allusions to her son's upbringing. Upon their brief interaction before Edith reenters from laying off her wraps, Mrs. Twillington notes her indignation at her waning influence:

ARTHUR (*anxiously*). Mother, why do you speak so? You're not going to be prejudiced against Edith before you really know her?

MRS. TWILLINGTON. Oh, no. But it's a bit natural that a mother should resent the wiping out, as it were, of her influence of twenty-four years by another woman's of twenty-four days.

ARTHUR. What do you mean?

⁶⁴ Maternal feminism here refers to the movement towards "social housekeeping" that many pro-suffragists were advocating. The term maternal feminism was used more broadly as well to describe the ideology that promoted the strengths of the maternal as assets to the feminine.

⁶⁵ Densmore, *Sex Equality*, 338.

MRS. TWILLINGTON. I mean that I supposed I had brought you up to believe in the advanced woman, and here, all of a sudden, you veer about at the girl's bidding, and say "Good Lord deliver us" at the bare mention of the word.⁶⁶

Ives also comments on women uniting and supporting one another without regard to male companionship. After Edith's secrets come out that she is a suffragette and a law student, she feels she must apologize to Mrs. Twillington,

EDITH. ...I did find it hard shocking you, because---because---

MRS. TWILLINGTON. There, now! You haven't shocked me at all, because I'm a new woman myself. You see Arthur made me promise not to shock you. He knew I belonged to a suffrage society.

EDITH. You?

MRS. TWILLINGTON. Yes, and if he doesn't want a new woman he can go and get an old one. You and I will keep house together (*Drawing Edith to her.*)⁶⁷

The final line of this piece brings the play full circle in its depiction of the maternal. After the celebration of Edith's acceptance into Arthur's law firm, the couple embrace each other and Mrs. Twillington ends the play with, "*(turning away)* I must go and see about dinner."⁶⁸

Another use of the maternal within suffrage drama, Alice C. Thompson's *A Suffragette Baby: A Comedy in One Act*, was published in 1912 by The Penn Publishing Company of Philadelphia. The plot revolves around a group of suffragettes: Susan, Sybil, Helen and Anna, who live together and are working to secure the vote. A two-year old girl, orphaned at their boarding house, is secretly adopted by Sybil, Helen and Anna, although separately. None of

⁶⁶ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 138.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 141.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 142.

them are aware that the other two have adopted the child as well. They have sworn to put the suffrage cause above everything else, and so they each keep their adoption secret, fearing the censure of their friends. However, each of the three guardians do confide in Mrs. McGinnis, their landlady, and place the little girl in her charge when they are otherwise engaged with suffrage activities. Of the four women, the one who is most vocally adamant against having children, Susan, is oblivious to all of this. After learning of the orphan, Susan informs Mrs. McGinnis that an officer of the Charity Organization Society will be coming to take the child. Returning from an important meeting where she made a speech extolling women and justifying their right to vote, Susan prepares for a reporter to come and interview her about it. The journalist, Harriet, arrives but is not very warmly received by Susan because of her fixation on the clothing women were wearing at the meeting rather than on the content of her speech. Harriet confesses that she is actually the society reporter, covering weddings and teas, but that she is filling in for Mrs. Barnes who normally does the woman's page. After the brief interview, Mrs. McGinnis enters weeping, saying that a man from the Charity Organization Society just came and forcibly took the child away from her without any word. Hearing this, Susan rushes out to retrieve the child, while the remaining women voice their worries. In their lamenting, the secret comes out that all three have separately adopted the child. Susan returns with the child and realizes that she also cares for her too much to let her go. It is decided that they will all raise the girl as their own and "bring her up in the truth faith" of woman's suffrage.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 230.

Alice Callender Thompson, not to be confused with the British suffragette Alice C. Thompson, was born in 1866 in Ohio, moving later to Pennsylvania.⁷⁰ Between 1900 and 1920, she wrote several plays, most of which were one-act comedies. Thompson wrote *A Suffragette Baby* in 1912, when babies were a hot topic for the anti-suffrage supporters who blamed women for neglecting their maternal duties to attend suffrage meetings. Many of the women responded by taking their babies with them to these functions. Thompson uses her one-act to refute the anti-suffrage ultimatum that women should have to choose between their legal rights and their maternal-nature. A playbill from 1917 shows this play to have been produced at an all-girls academy. Many of her other plays were also specified as “for girls.” It can be assumed that they were intended for female youth amateur performance which meant that the play was most likely not seen by the larger population of anti-suffragists.

Much like Ives’s piece, Thompson argues from a softer position of light humor in order to throw positive light on the New Woman. The plot deals with the maternal from a slightly different angle than *A Very New Woman* and *The Spirit of ’76*. *A Suffragette Baby* challenges what the “normal” maternal is within the woman-gender and what it needs to be. The play also shows how the desire and possession of a child, the childcare and domestic duties which are all attributed to the maternal, can exist within characters that are not normally associated with this part of feminine identity. Though women, these characters are suffrage supporters, financially independent from men, working outside the home and resistant to having a child, or at least having it known that they have one. All of this places them further from what defines the feminine gender, and yet, the maternal is applied to each of them. We have seen in our first two

⁷⁰ A British suffragette, poet and playwright during the same period was also named Alice C. Thompson (full name Alice Christiana Gertrude Thompson Meynell). Born in 1847 in Barnes, London, she is remembered primarily for her poetry.

plays that the maternal is able to be viewed as a separate entity and able to be moved. Now we can see that it is able to be affixed to characters that, while still female in sex, are viewed as being decidedly “unwomanly” in gender.

A Suffragette Baby is also among the first works to confront family unit conventions and to spark questions about maternal desire. Thompson makes her characters accessible to her audience by showing them to have the “natural” desire to mother. This way the opponents to suffrage who are afraid of women losing their womanly character can be reassured that these women at least have some of their natural priorities in order. Another progressive element is the reference to hired childcare. The women who adopt the child do not do the direct caring for her, but pay Mrs. McGinnis to do so. Thompson adds a degree of separation by making it an orphan child, similar to Edith’s character in *A Very New Woman*, in order for the entrusting of the child to Mrs. McGinnis not to be seen as a rejection of a mother’s natural instincts. The women, therefore, are not denying their own offspring but are generous guardians adopting an abandoned child. The tie to socialism is strong here and must be noted. Many at the time were advocating for a “domestic evolution” of the sort where women would be allowed to live economically independent of men and free from the fetters of home and domestic work. One solution proposed was to create socialized domestic environments--or communal kitchens--where one could obtain the meals and cleaning services needed, but outside the realm of the home. One of the progressive women at this time who promoted this socialization was Charlotte Perkins Gilman who stated that “women were holding back human evolution because of their confinement to household work and motherhood. The evolution of the human race,” she believed, “would be hastened by removing domestic work and child care from the home,

allowing women to undertake both motherhood and paid employment.”⁷¹ By having her women allocate childcare to another, Thompson presents the role of suffragette as one who is still wishing to nurture but also responsible and invested in the future. Susan embodies woman’s wish to have freedom and the belief she must sacrifice the maternal to do so. The other three women wish for a child to work for, which raises ideas about the justification of women who have children, having perhaps *more* of a right to work and vote. This assessment is most forceful toward the end of the play, as the reporter is leaving her interview,

SUSAN. And tell Mrs. Barnes I’ll be pleased to see her at our next meeting, if she’s not to busy.

HARRIET. Oh, poor Mrs. Barnes! If you had her work to do you’d find excuses, perhaps.

SUSAN. I--I! The hardest working woman in the city, who could be busier than I? I earn my own living, Miss Driver--I--

HARRIET. Yes, but you have only to feed and clothe one. Mrs. Barnes is a widow with three small children dependent upon her for everything. Good-bye; so pleased to have met you all. (*Exit, L.*)

HELEN. Three children!

SYBIL. (*sighing*). Something to work for.⁷²

This debate about having children is initiated in the beginning of the play after Susan regales the other women about the speech she delivered at the recent women’s meeting that extolled the benefits of women’s independence.

SYBIL. Surely you believe in the home, Susan?

⁷¹ Hayden. *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 184.

⁷² Friedl, *On To Victory*, 227.

SUSAN. Certainly. Isn't this a home? Aren't we perfectly happy here, we four free and independent women, responsible to no man for our actions, dependent upon no man for our necessities, glad to work for our daily bread? I think it is an ideal condition.

HELEN. But the children---

SUSAN. What children?

HELEN. I mean there should be children, or at least a child, in an ideal home.

SUSAN. Not necessarily. Children are a serious drawback to a career.

SYBIL. Or a great incentive.⁷³

Maintaining the proper consideration of the culturally constructed nature of gender identities when looking at this play and its author, we see that we return to the constructed maternal stereotypes involuntarily. The main struggle in the play is between the women's strong desire for the maternal and their drive to maintain their independence. Thompson delicately inserts provoking lines into the script which remind both the masculine and feminine public of what it means to be a mother and what working outside the private sphere can and does do. At the same time, it tempers the desire for the maternal with a judgement on suffragette elitism.

This piece can be seen as a farce because much of the humor is realized through improbable situations and physically comical aspects of quick entrances and exits reminiscent of bedroom farce. All four women, living in a symbiotic domicile, have secrets from one another and it is primarily their attempts at concealment that result in humorous situations. This combined with the juxtaposition of different types of women who form their own hierarchy within the household, and the play ends with the utopian scenario of women raising the child together. Though unorthodox family arrangements are much more frequent today, in the early

⁷³ Friedl, *On To Victory*, 224.

twentieth century it would have been laughable, and perhaps even scandalous, for women to raise a child as the play suggested. However, as the ending of a farcical entertainment, it is treated leniently by an audience who has just received an evening of amusement.

Despite its farcical nature, *A Suffragette Baby* provides a serious foundation on which to display our maternal label. Though the women characters in *The Spirit of '76* can claim the most masculine, the women in Thompson's piece are the most consciously so, given the ascriptions associated with suffragettes like Susan, Sybil, and Helen during this time period. Women who chose independence from men and work outside the home were in many cases dismissed in society as a bastardized masculinization. However, in this dramatic depiction, these women serve a valid purpose: namely, establishing the flexibility of our maternal label, specifically apart from the feminine. This act helps to uncover the maternal's true power.

Conclusion

Though anecdotal, the claim is that the ratification of the 19th Amendment was made possible by a mother. A 24 year-old representative from Tennessee, surprisingly turned the tide in the House of Representatives due in large part to his parent's advice. "Harry Burn--who until that time had fallen squarely in the anti-suffrage camp--received a note from his mother, Phoebe Ensminger Burn," states one historical source. In the note, Mrs. Burn had written, "Hurrah, and vote for suffrage! Don't keep them in doubt." The next day he defended his vote by declaring, "I know that a mother's advice is always safest for her boy to follow,...and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification."⁷⁴

While this story calls attention to the separate gender spheres--the private, illustrated by Phoebe's letter from home and the public, shown by Harry Burn's position in a public office--it is the leverage given to the mother that weakens the division. It can not be denied that the maternal influence is an important one. This thesis aims at emphasizing the impact of constructed maternal stereotypes on gender identity, and possibly on the subversion of gender association, within suffrage drama. As we have seen in the three plays discussed, the maternal role, though a part of what constructs the feminine, can also be seen as separate from the female gender. This is important because one possible step towards subverting gender attribution is being able to recognize the sub-categories of role assignment which construct a particular gender identification. In this way, we can attempt to examine separate feminine gendered entities, fragment and deconstruct the gender, thereby destabilizing its power as a comprehensive unit.

⁷⁴ "The Mother Who Saved Suffrage," <http://www.history.com/topics/19th-amendment-mother>

Ariana Curtis's anti-suffrage satire shows women rejecting the maternal and foisting it onto the men. Her separation of the maternal from the female had the effect of problematizing the normalcy of its attribution to the female. The very action of writing men characters acting as mothers or with maternal attributes shows that the re-assignment is possible. This means that the maternal can be seen as a separate attribution. Hence, it does not have to belong solely to the feminine. The seemingly or socially attributed "manly" features that are pointed out in *The Spirit of '76*--hunting, smoking, holding public office--have also been shown to operate within the feminine, though this was at one time considered an impossibility. The separation of maternal from the feminine in this play helps to define space the maternal role actually does inhabit. We can see that this space is not rigidly delimited. The maternal voice often came from the two male characters in this play, Mr. Wigfall or Thomas Carberry, and was used to talk about motherhood. The declarations of how and what motherhood should be created a profile for maternal stereotypes. The male-gendered maternal commentary, by helping define maternal space, affirmed it to be an entity in its own right.

However, the distinct essence of the maternal can only be helpful if it can be flexible in its application. *A Very New Woman* arguably has the most traditional maternal characters: one a mother and the other having childcare and domestic experience as well as actively entering into maternal-potential status as a wife. The maternal voices in this piece come from two women and describe the maternal space from within. In doing so, they fill in the outline given to us by *The Spirit of '76*, which commented on the maternal from outside the traditional space. Completion of the maternal space description establishes the maternal entity as being something moveable.

This is shown in how the women express their pro-suffrage views and how Mrs. Twillington passes the maternal role on to Edith by blessing her engagement with Arthur.

Left here, the maternal role's usefulness is limited, only being able to shift generationally. *A Suffragette Baby* allows us to see maternal assignment shift elsewhere. The desire for and possession of a child, the childcare and other domestic duties attributed to the maternal exist within all the characters in this play. If the maternal was inextricable from the feminine, this would not be feasible, since the women are not engaged in the correctly feminine gendered stylized actions. Though all the characters are women, none are actual mothers and their suffrage stance and way of living further dissociate them from the feminine gender. The application of the maternal on each of these characters, then, demonstrates that the maternal can be moved more than simply generationally within the feminine, but can start to move away from the gender entirely.

Part of this study attempted to cast a light on the stylized actions specific to that of the maternal. This was an interesting challenge because many sources, confirming the part played in feminine construction, labeled these duties as womanly, rather than maternal. Dolores Hayden writes in *The Grand Domestic Revolution* that,

Cooking food, caring for children, and cleaning house, tasks often thought of as 'woman's work' to be performed without pay in domestic environments, have always been a major part of the world's necessary labor. Yet no industrial society has ever solved the problems that a sexual division of this labor creates for women. Nor has any society overcome the problems that the domestic location of this work creates, both for housewives and for employed women who return from factories and offices to a second job at home.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Hayden. *The Grand Domestic Revolution*, 1.

The “problems” Hayden refers to involve the relegation of women to the home. This issue, prevalent during the women’s suffrage movement, necessitates the disruption of the norms currently established in gendered environments. In order to disrupt those norms, it is first of value to confront the maternal body performing the actions associated with such environments. Both supporters and opponents of women’s suffrage spent a significant amount of their efforts on using maternal qualities associated with women to fuel their arguments. The maternal was seen as the crux of womanhood and often the terms “mother” and “woman” were used synonymously. Since it is difficult to conceive of separating the mother from the feminine, it becomes necessary to confront the maternal issue within a period where the woman issue was being challenged. Fashioning tools out of mother-centered issues that would be useful in persuasive arguments, as our three suffrage dramas did quite effectively, helps to discover the autonomy of, define the space for and realize the movability of the maternal. Anti-suffragists easily manufactured evidence that the maternal stereotype, and therefore womanhood, would suffer as a result of woman’s emancipation. Suffrage supporters envisioned a future where maternal nature would continue to be strong--and perhaps stronger--when the vote came to the women. The maternal role is treated by some as a cross to bear and by others as a badge of honor, much as the New Woman title. Like a badge, it can be removed and looked at closely, to see what it can reveal about who else can wear it. Judith Butler confronts the idea of performing the maternal with a degree of flexibility regarding where this performance can be produced. She states,

Performativity cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms. And this repetition is not performed *by* a subject; this repetition is what enables a subject and constitutes the temporal condition for the subject. This iterability implies that 'performance' is not a singular 'act' or event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and

compelling the shape of the production, but not, I will insist, determining it fully in advance.⁷⁶

With this entity of the maternal and its related domesticity fused to the feminine body by way of the repetition of norms that are imposed on us, and yet simultaneously accepted passively, this thesis approaches the three works of suffrage drama with an understanding that the task of separating the maternal from the feminine is a difficult one. However, the preservation of the maternal within each play is encouraging to these efforts. The fact that the mother figure persists and is prevalent on both sides of the suffrage argument makes it easier to view what composes the maternal role and being able to identify space for this role helps us grant it autonomy from its association with the feminine. It appears that we are now at a point of departure once again. Repetition of new maternal applications, norms and actions will no doubt continue. Time alone will tell exactly how much the maternal can tell us--not just about femininity, but about humanity.

⁷⁶ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 95.

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